

Freshman English 101
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Unit 1: Analyzing Effective Writing

In this unit, you will first work in a group to analyze an editorial with fellow students before doing the same task in your first individual paper. Know these key points before you begin: your primary task is to determine how effective or ineffective the piece of writing seems to you or your group. Your agreement or disagreement with the author has nothing to do with this assignment. While you may want to comment on the issue discussed in the editorial, this is a matter to explore after you've examined the writer's effectiveness. Outside resources should be used only to support your points as to how well the writer did in his or her work.

Choosing an Editorial

Your first task will be to find three opinion pieces to bring to class for your group to look over. Your group will choose one editorial for your first group project, and then you'll do the same with another piece of writing for your individual paper.

What you're looking for are short articles that are obviously expressing an opinion and are not informative news items. You can find them in local newspapers on pages called "Editorials," "Opinion," or sometimes "Commentary." News magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek* often have a page set aside for such commentary on their back pages. Of course, you can look for opinion pieces on the internet, but you might need help from a librarian to know where to look. You should choose articles about the length of "The Whiney Generation" that have at least four or five paragraphs to work with. If the item is too short, you won't have enough material to analyze. If it's several pages or longer, you may have too much to read and critique.

At first, you'll merely need to collect three items to bring to class so that your group will have at least 9 to 12 items to choose from. So if you're uncertain about your articles, don't worry. Someone else might have just the article you'll need. It's worth noting that articles you think are ineffective are often the easiest to analyze. When a piece of writing is lacking in content, balance, objectivity, or reasoning, you have much you can criticize. This doesn't mean a very effective article can't be worked with--see sample student essays posted at my website for examples of how to do this.

Helpful Questions

After deciding which piece you wish to examine, discuss the following questions with your group:

1. What is the author's purpose? Is the thesis clearly stated or are you unsure what the writer is trying to say and do? Is the writer trying to inform, persuade, or simply express an opinion?
2. Who is the writer's audience? Does the writer effectively communicate with the audience with well-chosen words, images, and information? Does the writer assume his (or her) readers know about the issue or does the author prepare the reader with background details and the contexts of the issue? Can you distinguish between facts and opinions--do facts support the author's opinions?
3. How does the writer try to get his/her point across? Is the content an appeal to emotion or does the writer use reason and logic? Is his or her approach objective or is it clearly biased? Is the author credible? Why or why not? Does the information seem to come from reliable sources or merely expressions of personal opinion?
4. Does the writer present varying points of view or does he/she simply state what they think? Does the writer address what other opinions might be and respond to various perspectives other than his or her own? In other words, is the editorial balanced?
5. Was the editorial persuasive? What could have made it more effective? This will be the core of your papers.

Ideas to Consider

1. It's possible some aspects of the piece are effective and others less so. You can address what you think works well in one part of your paper and point to weaknesses in another.
2. To develop your points, quote or paraphrase phrases or sentences from the editorial so your reader knows what you're referring to. Do not assume your reader has read this editorial.
3. If you feel the writer is lacking in supporting detail, what sort of information would have strengthened the points? This is where outside sources might help you.
4. If the author does not adequately discuss opposing views, you might point out what arguments others can raise that are as effective or perhaps more important than what you read. Again, outside sources may help.
5. You should not use phrases like "Our group thinks Morgan made many good points" or "I think Morgan is on target when he claims . . ." Make your writing more effective by stating your opinions as "Clearly, Morgan makes many solid points" or "Most readers will find Morgan's ideas right on target because . . ."
6. Many students ask what to do if group members disagree on points. That's a good thing--see point 1 above. It's fair to divide your essay into aspects some see as strong and others might see as weak. Or you could determine the piece is effective for certain audiences but not others. Remember: agreeing or disagreeing has nothing to do with evaluating a piece of writing. You may disagree strongly with the editorial but find it effective. You can agree with it but find it rather thin or underdeveloped.

For other ideas, see model student papers posted at my website.